

1 TIMOTHY 1:6, 7

TEACHERS AND WANNABES

“Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.”¹

Ultimately, it is not the one who is the most polished speaker who changes lives; it is the one who knows the subject matter to be addressed and who is best able to communicate truth who will transform the lives of those who listen. Jeremiah, confronting false prophets, spoke on behalf of the LORD,

“Who among them has stood in the council of the LORD
to see and to hear his word,
or who has paid attention to his word and listened?
Behold, the storm of the LORD!
Wrath has gone forth,
a whirling tempest;
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.
The anger of the LORD will not turn back
until he has executed and accomplished
the intents of his heart.
In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

“I did not send the prophets,
yet they ran;
I did not speak to them,
yet they prophesied.
But if they had stood in my council,
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
and they would have turned them from their evil way,
and from the evil of their deeds.”

[JEREMIAH 23:18-22]

Today, multiplied preachers fill the pulpits of the nation, numerous personalities present their thoughts via radio, television and print media; nevertheless, those who speak the truth and who have something worth hearing may be in a decided minority. Those who speak as impelled by the Spirit of God may be rarer still. Self-help books instructing the unwary how to have a successful life and which are written by gurus of self-fulfilment fill the shelves of numerous bookstores; and television personalities promote every conceivable form of self-analysis and quick fixes for multiplied deficits—real or imagined. Despite all this “help,” people continue to be decidedly unhappy with their situation in life.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version** © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved

Those who occupy the sacred desk, labouring to produce love—love that arises “from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith,” are increasingly rare. Though the schools producing preachers may be faulted, I suggest that congregations bear awesome responsibility for the present situation because they refuse to hold preachers accountable to the Word.

I suppose a case can be made for accusing the preachers themselves for this present crisis. After all, we preachers have too often failed in our fiduciary duties to declare the whole counsel of God. Nevertheless, the professed people of God must assume responsibility to know the Word, whether the preacher declares the Word or not. Moreover, those who name the Name of the Lord Christ must apply the Word both in their daily lives and in the life of the congregation. I contend that those who occupy the pews must act with discretion and humility before the Lord, but they must accept responsibility to know and to do the will of God.

SWERVING FROM LOVE — Multiple passages in the Word inform us that those appointed to eldership are required to be teachers. As one example, Paul writes, “An overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable”; take special note of the next qualification, “*able to teach*” [1 TIMOTHY 3:2]. Paul will iterate this necessity in his second letter to Timothy, when he writes: “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be *able to teach others also*” [2 TIMOTHY 2:1, 2].

This necessity is emphasised yet again in but a few short sentences when the Apostle commands, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, *able to teach*, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” [2 TIMOTHY 2:24-26]. Paul’s written instructions to Titus after he was left in Crete, included the admonition that those appointed to eldership “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, *so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it*” [TITUS 1:9].

Obviously, the requirement to be able to teach entails more than the mere acquisition of knowledge. Any pagan can gather facts through reading a book about the Bible. However, one who is able to teach will have also stood in the presence of the Lord. It has always stirred me to witness Elijah’s oath with which he began every statement spoken on behalf of the LORD God. “Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, ‘As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand...’” [1 KINGS 17:1; see also 1 KINGS 18:5]. Apparently, this strong oath was also adopted by Elisha, the prophetic protégé of Elijah. Asked to give a prophecy on one occasion when Israel and Judah had allied against Moab, Elisha began his prophecy with the identical words Elijah had used: “As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand...” [2 KINGS 3:14]. Elisha also employed this same oath when refusing recompense from Naaman [see 2 KINGS 5:16].

On my bookshelves are some books with unfortunate titles: *The Fine Art of Preaching*, “*The Craft of Sermon Construction*” and “*The Art of Preaching*.” These books are beneficial in preparing to preach; however, the titles leave an impression that anyone can simply stand in the pulpit and speak on behalf of God. Again, it is a tragic truth that anyone can be trained to prepare a sermon; however, the crying need of the hour is for men of God who will invest time in the presence of God in order to ensure they have a message from God. Until there is a message, the plaint of the Puritans will remain, “The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed.”²

² John Milton included this quote from the English martyr Hugh Latimer in his poem, *Lycidas*, poem cited from Arthur Quiller-Couch (ed.), *Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250-1674*, <http://www.bartleby.com/101/317.html>,

Take careful note of the expectation of those who are to serve as elders—they are to be teachers. How is it, then, that we have come to a day when many of those who are called “elders,” and who are known as “pastors,” fail to fulfil the essential qualification? One major problem is an absence of emphasis on expository preaching. Pastoral students are trained to preach topically, or to speak to “felt needs,” rather than declaring “the whole counsel of God.”

Consequently, the people of God are untaught—they are unaware of the teaching of the Word. Our churches today have stressed credentials and connections when “hiring” a preacher to the exclusion of character and calling as criteria for appointment to eldership. After a short while, when confronted by the need for someone to bear the title “elder,” the people fall back on what they know—electing someone from the membership to lead the flock. More rapidly than one can imagine the congregation becomes a democracy without biblical direction, doing what feels right. Under such conditions, the flock becomes spiritually disoriented and spiritually malnourished. Soon, there are no new lambs born into the flock as each member increasingly focuses on his or her own interests to the exclusion of concern to fulfil the will of God.

I recall one church when confronted by the biblical teaching of qualifications for eldership and for appointment as deacons that responded by clamoring that any Christian was qualified. “Well, any of our people can meet those criteria,” one woman blustered. Candidly, such a position as she espoused is folly-wide-the-mark. Let’s look back to the text.

“Certain persons, by swerving from these...” What is the antecedent of “these” in the text? Recall our previous study in which the Apostle declares, “The aim of our charge is love.” Those who are to provide guidance must have uppermost in their own mind the creation of a body that reveals the love of God. This reflection of divine love arises from “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” If the leadership of the congregation do not possess these necessary qualities of godliness, it is doubtful that they will reproduce them in the assembly itself. It is a truism that everything rises or falls with leadership. If the leadership is corrupted and inadequate, the assembly will become ever more corrupt and increasingly marginalised.

Driven by a desire to hold onto power, or perhaps enjoying the position to which they are elected, those who mislead congregations rapidly degenerate into false teachers. The flock of God suffers even as such individuals grow in power and possibly even in stature in the eyes of the people of God. Let me say, as lovingly as possible without neglecting to speak the truth, that not every individual exercising authority within a congregation is fit for the task.

Thus, the false teacher who has swerved from pursuing love cannot express a pure heart, a good conscience or a sincere faith; and those who follow their lead will likewise be frustrated in their pursuit of these same qualities. Whenever one from within the flock endeavours to exhibit these precious qualities, he will be seen as a threat to the power of the false teacher. Thus, the righteous person will be attacked until he is ultimately silenced or driven from the congregation. Those members remaining will congratulate themselves on their stand for what they imagine to be purity, though the assembly is dying and as their souls shrivel.

What is especially tragic about this descent into error is that it is with full knowledge of what they are doing. However, for whatever reason, these false teachers deliberately choose to turn from the truth and stumble into error. When they swerved from “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith,” they began a rapid descent into error. The word translated “swerving” in my text occurs three times in Scripture. The first time is, of course, here in the text that speaks of “certain persons ... swerving from” these qualities [1 TIMOTHY 1:6].

The next occurrence is in **1 TIMOTHY 6: 21**. “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith” [**1 TIMOTHY 6:20, 21**]. Guarding the deposit entrusted to the elder will protect from swerving from the Faith. Failure to guard the good deposit [the knowledge of the Living Christ, see **2 TIMOTHY 1:8-14**] leads to deviating from the Faith.

The final occurrence of this particular word in the Bible is found in **2 TIMOTHY 2:18**. “Avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some” [**2 TIMOTHY 2:16-18**]. Notice that in this instance, two “false teachers” were claiming that the resurrection had already passed. Their efforts appear to have generated more and more ungodliness; and their blabbering was, even then, spreading like gangrene.

Before moving to the next concept in the text, I must point out a serious matter in the text we just read—***moral error is the logical result of doctrinal error***. Let that thought sink in. Moral error is the logical result of doctrinal error. Whenever one begins to teach doctrinal error, or whenever one begins to tolerate doctrinal error, it is almost inevitable that they will excuse or even participate in moral error. They have already begun to teach a lie, so the logical step is that they will jettison trust given sufficient reason to do so.

This same truth is emphasised in the writings of John. The Greek term indicates that these individuals either overshot the goal or stumbled off the path. In any case, it is important to see that Paul does not treat them as though they were godly, or even as though they were brothers. It is very much akin to the situation the Apostle of Love addresses when he writes, “Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works” [**2 JOHN 9-11**]. Here is a truth that must not be ignored: ***apostasy is proof of terminal unbelief***. When apostasy has contaminated doctrine, there is no justification for trying to reverse the trend—it is too late.

If ever there was a time for straight talk, it is when false teachers begin to disseminate their error. It is vital to realise that it is not loving to ignore the error of false teachers—it is cowardly, it is craven. To fail to confront doctrinal error is to abandon those who are under the errant teaching to a descent into moral decay. For this reason, we are morally obligated to speak out against doctrinal error.

Stumbling off the path or overshooting the goal, Paul states that these false teachers “have wandered away into vain discussion.” To “wander away” translates a verb that is rich in the mind of those reading the original language. The word is a medical term that spoke of a dislocated joint. Here is an example of the verb when it is used to convey that precise meaning. “Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed” [**HEBREWS 12:12, 13**]. “Put out of joint” translates the Greek word *ektrèpō*.

In the text, the wandering away to which Paul points is an action that had occurred at some point in the past. In other words, even before they usurped the position of leadership, the false prophets had wandered away. These men had not merely strayed; they had violently departed from the path of truth. Think of the other instances where Paul uses this word to describe false teachers. Of course, the term occurs in our text and in **1 TIMOTHY 6:20**, which we have already cited. However, several other passages will assist in our understanding.

In **1 TIMOTHY 5:15**, the Apostle writes that “Some have already strayed after Satan.” Writing of “some” is similar to Paul speaking of “certain persons,” as he does in our text. He knows who they are, though he will not name them. Though they knew the will of God, the false teachers had knowingly “strayed after Satan”; they had deliberately turned from truth to follow error. Harsh though it may sound to our ears, this is the concept Paul conveyed to Timothy.

The other instance in which Paul uses this verb is found in his second letter to Timothy. The Apostle writes of a dark time that was even then looming—a time that I fear has arrived. The Apostle cautioned, “The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” [**2 TIMOTHY 4:3, 4**]. Congregations that will not endure sound teaching, accumulate for themselves paid preachers who will say what they are instructed to say because the people have already turned away from listening to the truth and now “wander off into myths.” The wandering off to which Paul refers in this passage is the same concept that is found in our text today. The false teachers wandered off the path of truth; and those who listen to them will likewise wander off into myths.

“Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion.” The concept of “vain discussion” is a concept employed by Paul when discussing false teachers. The word speaks of idle chatter or of so much background noise. The Greek noun is *mataiologia*; it is a hapax legomenon—a word that only occurs once in the New Testament. However, that does not mean that the thought is unique to this text.

The adjective constructed from this noun occurs only once in Paul’s writings. In the Letter to Titus, the Apostle writes, “There are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party” [**TITUS 1:10**]. The adjective is translated “empty talkers” in this instance. Again, the idea communicates the thought that what they teach is nothing more than idle chatter, futile verbiage, background noise.

In **ROMANS 1:21**, Paul uses the verbal form to describe individuals who refused to honour God as God or even to give thanks to Him as God; such people “became futile in their thinking.” The word translated “futile,” constructed from the same root that is used to warn the false teachers against “vain discussion,” speaks of that which is empty, meaningless or purposeless.

Let me ask you a simple question. When someone stands behind the sacred desk, do you want them to tell you what they think? Or do you want them to speak with the authority of the Word? Shall it be, “Thus saith the Lord?” Or will it be, “I think?” Paul has contrasted the speculation of the false teachers with the faith of the Word. Do you prefer to follow the sharp, distinct sound of one who speaks as from the Lord? Or do you listen to hear the bugle giving an indistinct note? You soon become like those to whom you listen.

All teaching demands that we apply the test of asking whether this comes from God? Or does it grow out of the fertile imagination of a mere man? The test provided in the text asks whether the teaching promotes love. Or does this teaching produce division? Does the teaching build up the church? Or does this teaching build up those giving it out? We are to judge doctrine by its fruit. Does this promote the glory of God and the good of the congregation?

The Apostle has cautioned Timothy, “If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain” [**1 TIMOTHY 6:3-5**].

RIGHTEOUS DESIRE; IMPROPER POSITION — Permit me to stress a point that must be heard—not all who are false teachers set out to mislead; in many instances, they begin well. Nevertheless, we know that not everyone who begins well ends well. At some point, the false teachers swerved from love because they did not have pure hearts and good consciences and sincere faith. Swerving from these, they had wandered into meaningless chatter.

In the closing days of his life, the Apostle would write to Timothy, “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” [2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8]. Paul would contend that he had finished well. We want to begin well, and we want to end well. In between, so much as lies within, we want to stay on the path assigned.

Paul makes several significant points about the false teachers. Note the points and consider them as you continue your progress toward love. First, when he says these false teachers were “desiring to be teachers of the law,” he used the present tense participle. In the Greek language, tense does not speak of time—tense speaks of the quality of an action. The present tense speaks of continuing action. In other words, *these individuals had a continuing, though yet unfulfilled yearning to be teachers of the Law*. Both the participle and the infinitive are present tense, indicating that they realised that though they could not be what they wanted to be, they would continue to push to achieve their goal. Today, we might say they were insecure and torn by ambition that was not only unfulfilled, but which could never be filled!

The second point is that *they were ignorant!* Paul says they are “without understanding.” In short, they were ignorant! Capable of multiplying words, even able to speak eloquently, they were without understanding of what they claimed to know! These false teachers, as is true of all false teachers, were living in a state of unreality. They were trying to present themselves as experts, yet they were ignorant even of the most basic spiritual concepts. Here is a truth to learn: eloquence can be a mask for ignorance. Train yourself to hear what is said and not how it is said.

Later, in this Letter to Timothy, Paul will write, “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” [1 TIMOTHY 3:1]. However, he does not say that everyone who aspires to the office of overseer should be an overseer. In past messages I have spoken of a Methodist minister named Roland McGregor. I came to know Roland because he played guitar and sang to prisoners in my first ministry. On one occasion, I talked at some length with Roland. He did not believe Jesus was very God. He did not believe the Bible was the inerrant, infallible Word of God. He did not believe there was such a condition as being saved. And he did not believe that those who were not saved faced an eternity separated from the Living God. In fact, he didn’t believe much.

Shocked by the openness of his unbelief, I asked Roland why he had become a minister. His answer revealed much about the philosophy of at least one false teacher, and perhaps his answer reveals something about most false teachers. He chose to become a minister because he considered it an easy job that paid well. As a minister he enjoyed respect in the community and was convinced that he would never have to work hard. Well, who wouldn’t want a job like that?

I have already alluded to the fact that the elder is responsible to have a message from the Lord. It is not the task of the elder to present a course in systematic theology or to direct studies in philosophy or in sociology—his responsibility is to so speak that the people hear the voice of God speaking through the preached word as he points them to the written Word of God.

Of himself, Paul would cite a hymn and then make a humble, though powerful declaration about himself.

“For there is one God
and one mediator between God and humanity,
Christ Jesus, Himself human,
who gave Himself—a ransom for all,
a testimony at the proper time.

“For this I was appointed a herald (*kêrux*), an apostle (I am telling the truth; I am not lying), and a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth” [1 TIMOTHY 2:5-7, HCSB].

The Apostolic declaration would be iterated in the opening words of the Apostle’s second letter to the young theologian. Paul writes, “For this gospel I was appointed a herald (*kêrux*), apostle, and teacher, and that is why I suffer these things. But I am not ashamed, because I know the One I have believed in and am persuaded that He is able to guard what has been entrusted to me until that day” [2 TIMOTHY 1:11, 12 HCSB]. He saw himself as a spokesman for the Lord of glory; the same is true of each preacher to this day.

Shortly after arriving in British Columbia, a group of men and women travelled from Texas to Burnaby to assist in refurbishing the church building in which we met. The men worked each day on the building while their wives conducted backyard Bible studies throughout multiple neighbourhoods. Each evening, the men conducted lay-led revival meetings in area churches. It was a very special time. One term of address left local parishioners somewhat bemused. The Texans addressed me as “Preacher.” “Where do you want this, Preacher?” “What time is the meeting this evening, Preacher?” Canadians thought that to be a strange term of address for a minister of Christ.

I confess that it seemed quite normal to me, having only arrived from the south. However, in light of the apostolic declaration, the honorific is actually a powerful affirmation of the calling of the man of God. He is a preacher! Listen to the previous passage from the translation I normally use. “I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me” [2 TIMOTHY 1:11, 12].

With the Apostle, I can testify of myself, “I magnify my ministry” [from ROMANS 11:13]. Since the day Christ Jesus saved me, I have wanted to do nothing other than preach the Gospel of Christ the Lord. I came to faith following a hard childhood that turned my life bitter. Filled with malice toward mankind and hatred toward God, Christ the Lord invaded my life and called me by His grace. I learned of Christ and His sacrifice; suddenly, all the training I had received as a child made sense. The teaching of my granddad and the prayers of my dad bore fruit to the glory of Christ the Lord.

Almost immediately, I began to preach on the streets of Dallas, in nursing homes and especially in a prison farm. I wanted nothing so much as to tell others of the mercy of God who saved me though I was a sinner. Every challenge to reaching that goal seemed to me as a signpost on the path to fulfilling my calling. Every opposition raised against me preaching seemed to me as though it were encouragement to continue toward the goal of pointing others to Christ Jesus. I consumed the Word, reading and rereading what was written so that I could understand the message presented. I read entire commentaries as light reading and theological tomes in order to learn as much as I could about the Saviour and His plan for mankind.

I cannot say that I did not sense the weight imposed by the appointment I received. James, the half-brother of our Lord, cautioned, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” [JAMES 3:1]. His words served to caution against rushing ahead without giving careful and prayerful thought to what I was doing. I recognised the awesome responsibility of the one who stands behind the sacred desk, for the eternal welfare of souls depends upon what is taught. If I mislead those who listen, I stand condemned before the True and Living God. How great will be my punishment in that instance. However, if I follow Christ and speak the words which He puts in my mouth, how great shall be my reward in that day.

For the false teacher, though he may contend that his motives are good, he lacks a calling for what he is teaching; and since he fails to produce love because he has neither a pure heart, nor a good conscience, nor a sincere faith, his character is irreparably flawed until the deficit is addressed. And that is the tragedy of what Paul is saying. Stumbling off the path of truth, they are too invested in the error they are teaching to humble themselves and return to the narrow way. These teachers, so-called, had decided that a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith were not worth pursuing. They justified their new pursuit by multiplying words! Thus, they continue blindly herding the blind toward oblivion and eternal destruction.

THE PRIMACY OF DOCTRINE — What is the purpose of a congregation? Why does it matter whether you attend the services of your church or not? What do you expect to find when you attend the services of the congregation? As part of the answer to such queries, I point you back to a statement that is easily neglected since it is written of the earliest days of the churches. Doctor Luke penned the passage, describing the life of the first congregation in Jerusalem. Those who received the message that the Apostles had faithfully delivered on the Day of Pentecost were baptised and united as a congregation.

Afterwards, we read of that first congregation, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” [ACTS 2:42-47].

This first congregation saw as their reason for meeting *fellowship* (check, we have that one down), *worship* (check, we do that), *prayer* (check, we at least tolerate the pastoral prayer) and *evangelism* (well, that is why we pay the pastor). However, I elided over the first necessity for meeting in assembly—the members “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching!” ***Without doctrine, all the remaining benefits of assembling fails!***

Believe it or not, I have had professing Christians whinge and whine because they had too much doctrine. Little has changed since the days of the writer of the Letter to Hebrew Christians. “About [Christ’s priesthood] we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” [HEBREWS 5:11-14].

Paul is writing Timothy some three decades after this first bloom of the Faith. Almost as soon as people began to gather into various assemblies, however, false teachers arose. Their error was not simply a matter of practises or opinions—truth itself was at stake! Since these erstwhile law teachers were promoting themselves, they were obviously misusing the Law. While there may always be questions about the Law, it is safe to say that any drift into legalism, or any drift into the opposite extreme of ecclesiastical libertarianism is the result of doctrinal distortion. Also, controversy—especially controversy that hinders growth among the churches—is often indicative of doctrinal deviation. Displacing dependence upon God while focusing on what we have in hand, or personal empire building, or compromising in an attempt to please the denizens of this dying world can each be demonstration of a lack of doctrinal perspicuity.

Despite numerous schools and seminaries that are valiantly endeavouring to teach biblical doctrine today, doctrinal deviation appears to be increasing among the churches. There are several reasons that one can advance to suggest why such is happening. To be certain, there is widespread ignorance of the Bible relative to what was understood even a generation past. This situation is exacerbated by the absence of family Bible reading and instruction today. This condition arises in great measure because the family evening meal has become a thing of the past; consequently, fathers do not read the Bible with their families and family prayer is at best a distant memory.

In part, I do blame the churches for this situation. Church members have transformed the congregation by modelling it after the world. So, Pastors have become so encumbered with administrative duties and community events that they have little time for preparation to preach the Word. Pastors are expected to be counsellors rather than shepherds of the flock. Where is that famous verse, “Pastors, counsel the lovesick and the casual?” I do read, “Preach the Word!”

Let me pointedly speak to pastors, however. For we often allow ourselves to become unbalanced—we are perhaps so focused on pulpit evangelism that doctrinal preaching suffers. Worse still, younger generations have been trained by electronic media to ensure shortened attention spans and inability to follow serious and deep doctrinal discussions. Thus, the contemporary Christian, untaught and unprepared to defend what she thinks she believes, is easy prey for cults who are better prepared to “make confident assertions” about their errant views than the professing saint is about her Faith. The average Christian has little idea that those who appear so confident are “without understanding [about] what they are saying.”

I know that I have been speaking primarily to professing Christians. However, though I hesitate to say so, the things of which I have spoken in this message today are equally applicable in the world at large. Doctrine informs government, whether government realises that truth or not. Certainly, the governance of a congregation is dependent upon doctrine, but God’s law applies throughout His Creation.

As I prepared for the message this past week, I read the account of a thoughtful theologian who each semester asked his class, “Why is adultery wrong?”

The students would answer, almost in chorus: “Because God says so.”

“No,” the theologian would respond. “God says so *because it is wrong*.” What the theologian meant was that if right and wrong are but a matter of Divine whim, we are all at the mercy of the greatest bully in the universe. But if there *is* such a thing as Right and Wrong—if there are, always and forever, certain ideas and behaviors that will make us better, or that will utterly destroy us—and a merciful God steps in to direct us clearly and consistently to which is which, then we are in the hands of a Creator who is at once just and merciful, loving and unyielding—a God inseparable from the Truth. Doctrine matters, even to outsiders.

Thus it is with those who would make, defend and enforce the laws of a nation—be they judge or attorney, legislator or governor, prosecutor or president. Either the laws they implement are grounded in a truth more eternal than their own emotions and a moral code more profound than their own intuition—or else they’re just flexing their power, playing at politics, and force-feeding us their own instincts of the moment.

“Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites,” Edmund Burke wrote. “Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”

If there is disintegration of freedoms within society, and that certainly appears to be the case, it is because the churches have failed to present sound doctrine. The consequences of our failure are more far-reaching than we could have ever imagined. The fate of the nation may well depend upon the people of God and whether they will now insist upon healthy teaching from those who lead them, or whether they will content themselves with “Certain persons, [who] by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.” The choice is ours. May God give us wisdom to know His will and courage to pursue His will. Amen.